

WARREN CHANG

Voice of the Fields



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Warren Chang's evocative paintings of fieldworkers are rooted in everyday life. At core he is a visual storyteller, describing in pictures the world he sees and experiences. As a former professional illustrator, he has carefully considered the nature of art, in contrast to the crafting of a picture. For him, art means personal connection and an expression arising from deep philosophical and spiritual reservoirs. His reading of Tolstoy's *What is Art?* and John Steinbeck's fiction led him to find resonance with a subject right in his own backyard—the fieldworkers of the Monterey Peninsula's agricultural community where he was born, lives and works.

Chang derives much inspiration from the history of art, and studies techniques and processes of the past. He particularly favors the work of the Caravaggio-influenced seventeenth century European masters Diego Velázquez and Rembrandt van Rijn as well as Jan Vermeer. Like them he also emphasizes genre painting—figurative scenes from ordinary life. However, Chang's fieldworker paintings resonate more clearly with the nineteenth century French Barbizon School of realism, and specifically with the paintings of Jean-François Millet. Millet's 1857 masterpiece *The Gleaners*, now iconic, was extremely controversial in its time. Millet depicted a naturalistic view of three peasant women laboring to gather a few leftover grains for food, and set them as the central focus of a large, exquisite work of art. The painting drew attention to the plight of the poor as he intended. But it outraged many art patrons and critics because he ignored long-established academic and artistic traditions by appropriating the format reserved for major political, religious, or mythological figures and applying it to the depiction of struggling peasants.

Over one hundred fifty years on, Chang's fieldworker paintings are unexpectedly relevant and eye opening. His impulse is similar to Millet's: to reveal honestly and with elemental regard the lives of people commonly overlooked or discounted, but who are still part of our communities. Although not precisely a fieldworker, Chang's powerful painting *Flower Girl* from 2013



captures this predicament in an all-too-familiar scene of a roadside flower vendor. Two distinct yet parallel worlds collide: in one, a solitary young woman in a sweatshirt and jeans offers bouquets for sale from the highway's shoulder; in the other, anonymous drivers in their comfortably self-contained vehicles whiz past. The warm, low light suggests approaching dusk, enhancing the strangeness of the situation and its pervading sense of isolation. Chang has made a remarkable portrait of a poised, steadfast young woman who despite her tenuous circumstances projects a dignified determination deserving of attention.

Although drawn to historic painting techniques, Chang is nevertheless a twenty-first century artist. He actively searches out subjects and locations for paintings as if scouting for a movie, and will impulsively pull off the road to make a quick sketch, or snap a photograph of an interesting scene. In practice, fieldworkers may be unwilling or unable to pose for him, and may even balk at photographs. In these instances Chang works from sketches and later enlists his art students, friends and family to act as models. Like a director preparing actors for a part, he supplies them with clothing and props, and arranges them into position. The 2008 painting *Harvesters Resting* arose from his sketch of a group of seated workers seen mostly from behind. With his sympathetic eye and a unified palette of greys, tans and greens, he seamlessly evokes their feelings of camaraderie and shared experience. The grove of trees nearby seems to echo the worker's own fellowship, and with the distant hills, offers a kind of natural haven. His subdued but sophisticated palette lends it—and in fact, all of his paintings—a quiet luminosity and an almost reverent hush.

This keen color awareness is supported by Chang's time-honored practice of making small color studies for each new work. He follows with a complete raw umber underpainting, which helps to solidify his composition and unify its tonal range. In the painting *Approaching Storm* from 2006, his use



of color seamlessly connects and enhances an already lively scene. In the foreground, workers' sun-washed yellow jackets and aprons reinforce the distant yellow glow rising from the fading fields and echo a slim strip of sunlight still visible in the gathering skies. Their dark jackets find a counterpart in the line of trees running along the foot of the bluish hills. A few distinct highlights of complimentary orange peek from pockets, imbuing the painting with a rhythmic musicality.

The central quality of all Chang's fieldworker paintings is however, their unmistakable humanity. Despite the work's difficulty, an aura of composure and quiet dignity underlies the portrayal of each distinctive individual, especially evident in the portrait, *The Good Earth*, 2016. Whether at work or at rest, the figures radiate a sense of mutual respect and the spark of human connection. People engaging with each other, as in the complex figurative compositions *Lunch Break*, 2015 and *Give Us Our Daily Bread*, 2017, or with the land, as in *Carrot Harvest at Dawn*, 2016 and *Orchard in July*, 2017, feel dynamically alive and authentic inside their stillness. We can easily imagine that in the next moment someone will jump up to grab a hoe or turn their head to continue an interrupted conversation.

Although Warren Chang's fieldworker paintings may rest uneasily within the bounds of contemporary art, their significance remains undeniable. Addressing a largely marginalized, often migrant group of people with respect and awareness, Chang's beautifully observed work illuminates the lives he depicts, enabling us to better appreciate and understand them. They reveal our shared humanity, and more accurately reflect the totality of life on the Monterey Peninsula—an invaluable message for us today.

Helaine Glick,
Independent Curator